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**Transformation through Loss and Grief:  
A Study of Personal Transformation Following Bereavement  
Steve Taylor PhD, Leeds Beckett University, UK**

**Abstract:**

The cases of 16 individuals (12 women and 4 men) who reported powerful transformational experiences following bereavement were examined, using a mixed methods approach, including a qualitative thematic analysis of interviews and two psychometric scales. Both approaches found significant evidence of positive personal change. Prevalent themes included a sense of permanent transformation, a less materialistic attitude, a different attitude to death and a sense of inner well-being. The changes were reported as stable and permanent, over long periods of time (a mean of over 13 years since the original bereavement experiences). Two psychometric measures showed statistically significant results. The term “post-traumatic transformation” is used to describe the experience of most of the participants. Parallels are identified between the transformation experienced by the participants and Maslow’s descriptions of “self-actualizers” and the states of optimum human development (or “wakefulness”) described by spiritual traditions. I suggest reasons for the relationship between psychological turmoil and personal transformation.

**Keywords:** bereavement, transformation, spiritual awakening, self-actualization, post-traumatic growth

## **Transformation through Loss and Grief: A Study of Personal Transformation Following Bereavement**

### **Introduction**

The concept of post-traumatic growth suggests that, in the long term aftermath of traumatic events, individuals may develop positive characteristics such as increased appreciation, a stronger sense of meaning and purpose, more authentic and intimate relationships, and a greater sense of confidence and competence (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1990; Calhoun, & Tedeschi, 1999). From the beginning of research into post-traumatic growth, it was recognised that bereavement is one of its most significant sources (Kessler, 1987; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1990; Lehman et al., 1993; Frantz, Trolley & Farrell, 1998). Shuchter (1986) found that, two years after losing their partners, the majority of a group of widows and widowers felt they could see life from a wider perspective, were less affected by trivial worries, and were more appreciative of important things. They felt that they had become more sensitive, more self-reliant, more open and more spiritual in their everyday lives. Similarly, Matthews (1991) interviewed 26 widows who reported that since the death of their spouse they had become more thoughtful, decisive, independent and and appreciative. In a study of 312 individuals who had lost loved ones approximately a year previously, Frantz, Trolley, and Farrell (1998) found that around a third of participants reported improved communication and relationships, greater maturity and self-confidence.

More recently, Calhoun et al. (2010) found that bereaved individuals reported increased confidence and resilience, increased engagement with others, and a greater sense of purpose. In a study of 325 bereaved individuals, Boyraz, Horne, & Sayger (2010) found increased spiritually, a greater sense of appreciation, improved relationships and a greater sense of opportunity. Berzoff (2011) has suggested that the grieving process itself may be transformational, fostering the development of new goals, ideals and capacities. While Gillies and Niemeyer (2006) have suggested that post-traumatic growth may stem from the meaning-making activities of bereaved individuals, as they try to make sense of their experiences. This effort may lead to sense of new identity, a new perspective on the world, and a new sense of purpose.

In more specific examples, Cadel and Sullivan (2006) found evidence of PTG in the bereaved caregivers of HIV/AIDS patients, which co-existed with high levels of PTSD. In a study of bereaved parents, Klass (1995) found that, following a period of adjustment and acceptance, many participants felt that their lives had become more authentic and meaningful. The healing process involved forms of profound personal transformation, including an awareness of "connections with that which transcended the physical and biological world, and with their perception of an underlying order in the world. These spiritual aspects of the resolution of the grief were central elements in the parents' rebuilding of their lives to be able to live in a changed world" (p. 264). Similarly, Parappully et al. (2002) studied a group of parents whose children had been murdered, and found that the bereavement had been a catalyst of profound personal growth. The parents reported increased self-confidence, self-reliance, compassion and inner strength, together with a greater sense of appreciation of life.

In my previous studies of the transformational potential of intense psychological turmoil (Taylor, 2012; 2013a; 2013b), bereavement emerged as a significant factor. In a study which found evidence of 24 cases of reportedly permanent "transformation through suffering" (Taylor, 2012), four cases involved bereavement. In a study of 25 cases of self-reported "spiritual awakening" (Taylor, 2013a), 6 cases were reported as following bereavement.

### *Post-Traumatic Transformation*

One pertinent finding of the above-mentioned studies (Taylor, 2012, 2013) was that in many cases change took place suddenly and dramatically and was so fundamental that it was perhaps more akin to *transformation* than growth. This led me to coin the term "post-traumatic transformation," characterized as a sudden shift into a new higher-functioning identity, with a new perspective on life, a new awareness of reality, different cognitive and perceptual functioning, and new values and goals (Taylor, 2013b, 2017).

As this description shows, the characteristics of post-traumatic transformation are essentially the same as post-traumatic growth. The primary difference is that these characteristics emerge suddenly, following an instantaneous transformative event, rather than gradually, over a long period of change. Many of the participants from Taylor (2012) could specify a particular moment at which transformation occurred, often at the moment when they shifted into an attitude of acceptance of their predicament. One participant described how, as an alcoholic undergoing the AA recovery process, he experienced transformation at the moment when he "handed over" his problem. Another participant had become severely disabled, and underwent a shift at the point when he heard a voice inside his head say, "Let go, man, let go.

Look at how you're holding on. What do you think life's telling you?" (Taylor, 2012, p.49). There were several similar cases in Taylor (2013a), including a woman who went through a period of intense post-natal depression, entering into a psychotic state, which led to four nights without sleep. In the midst of this turmoil, she had an argument with her husband, which suddenly triggered what she described as "feelings of such perfect joy and peace. I remember thinking afterward 'so that's what I'm supposed to feel like!' This experience was multidimensional...In a mystical consciousness, within that one instant, you sense forever and ever, and are forever changed."

A possible secondary difference between post-traumatic growth and post-traumatic transformation is that, in the latter, the change is more intense and fundamental. In such moments of sudden and dramatic transformation, the individual may feel as if they have assumed a different identity, almost as if they have been reborn, with a different perception of the world, and a different attitude to life. In the study reported in Taylor (2012), one participant described the shift as follows: "It's like there are two people—there's a before and after" (p.37). Another remarked, "There's no going back. I'm a different person now, for the rest of my life" (p.37). A woman who experienced post-traumatic transformation after the death of her daughter described her experience as like breaking through "to another state. I've moved up to another level of awareness which I know is going to stay with me" (Taylor, 2012, p.37). Admittedly, it is difficult to quantify the intensity of transformational experiences (and obviously post-traumatic growth also sometimes involves profound changes) but sudden and dramatic transformational experiences seem to be strongly associated with a profound shift in identity.

Previous studies have found post-traumatic transformation can occur across the same wide range of triggers as post-traumatic growth, although it is particularly closely related to extremely intense and dramatic incidences of trauma such as life-threatening illness (for example, a diagnosis of cancer), and bereavement (Taylor, 2012; 2013a; 2013b). Near-death experiences - when a person "dies" for a short time before being resuscitated and then reports a series of significant conscious experiences, incorporating many of the phenomenological characteristics of mystical experiences - are also associated with post-traumatic transformation (Sabom, 1998; Sartori, 2014).

I decided to conduct a research study specifically on bereavement, to investigate its transformational potential in more detail. The present study aimed to examine the context in which the transformational experiences occurred, the changes in behaviour, attitude and perspectives that they generated, and whether they could be characterised as gradual or sudden.

## Method

### *Participants*

Ethical approval for the research was granted by Leeds Beckett University. Participants were attracted by a variety of methods. A number of participants had made contact with me previously, after reading the previous research mentioned above, particularly following its publication in a popular form (Taylor, 2011). (Again, people disclosed a wide range of different forms of trauma, but a proportion were related to bereavement.) In these cases, the correspondents were recontacted with an e-mail reading “You may remember that some time ago you wrote to me about a transformational experience connected to bereavement. I’m about to start a research project on spiritual and personal transformation through bereavement and would like to follow up on the experience you sent to me originally.” Other participants were recruited through social media, via an announcement that read “I’m about to begin a research project on transformational experiences in relation to bereavement. If you have had a spiritual or personal transformation experience following the death of a loved one, please contact me...”

16 participants were recruited in this way. The sample consisted of 12 females and 4 males, ranging in age from 45 to 64 ( $M = 52.7$ ). All were white caucasians, including 9 US citizens, 6 UK citizens and 1 Irish citizen. 13 of the 16 participants had college degrees or higher qualifications. 4 participants reported that they had been religious (all from Christian denominations) at the time of their transformational experiences. 8 reported that there had been a spiritual aspect to their lives prior to their transformational experiences, in that they were interested in spiritual ideas and practices. 3 others reported that, although they were not interested in or aware of spirituality *per se*, they had an interest in philosophical or metaphysical questions about the meaning of life and the nature of reality. 5 others reported no interest at all in spiritual ideas or practices.

There were a variety of different forms of bereavement. 4 cases were linked to the death of parents, 4 to the death of friends, 3 to the death of siblings, 3 to the death of partners or spouse, 1 to the death of a grandparent, and 1 to an abortion. In 11 out of the 16 cases, the death was sudden and unexpected, rather than anticipated. 2 participants reported that the death were both anticipated and sudden, in that the bereaved individuals were ill, but not expected to die at that time. 3 participants reported that the deaths were wholly anticipated.

### *Procedure*

A mixed methods approach was chosen, as a way of providing greater validation. I felt that psychometric scales would provide some more objective evidence of any positive changes the participant might report, and also combine with the qualitative evidence to produce a more accurate depiction of the participants' experiences.

Using a semi-structured interview approach, participants I encouraged participants to describe their experiences in as much detail and with as much narrative flow as possible, with very few interruptions. I asked them to describe the nature of their transformation, including the characteristics of their present experience, with key questions such as "Was there a particular point at which you underwent transformation / had an awakening experience?" "What was the context in which the experience occurred?" and "How has your attitude to life changed since the experience? e.g. your goals or sense of meaning in life." (See Appendix for full list of questions.) The interviews took place via Skype, and lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. Transcripts of the interviews were returned to the participants for corrections and approval.

A thematic analysis of the transcripts was undertaken (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was performed by a research assistant, independently of me (in case my previous research led to a bias towards certain previously occurring themes). The analysis entailed a process of deep engagement with the data by the research assistant. Units of meaning were grouped into clusters, becoming significant codes or themes. Once the codes had been identified, they were ranked in terms of prevalence.

Following the interviews, the participants were sent links to two psychometric scales, and completed them online.

### *Measures*

The Spiritual Intelligence Self-Report Inventory (SISRI). This is a 24-item self-report scale (King, 2008; King & DeCicco, 2009) that measures aspects of "spiritual intelligence" such as Transcendental Awareness (the capacity to identify transcendent dimensions/patterns of the self and others) and Conscious State Expansion (the ability to enter and exit higher/spiritual states of consciousness at one's own discretion). Studies using the scale have found an acceptable level of reliability (Anbugeetha, 2015; Chan & Siu, 2016). Items are assessed on a 5-point scale, ranging from 0 (not at all true of me) to 4 (completely true of me). The internal reliability of the scale was 0.92.

**The Inventory of Secular/Spiritual Wakefulness (ISSW).** This measure is a validated 28-item scale designed to measure prevalent characteristics of spiritual and secular wakefulness as identified by previous research (Kilrea, 2013; Taylor, 2013). Here spiritual wakefulness is conceived as a psychological shift into a higher-functioning or optimum state, with characteristics including: well-being/positive affective states; a sense of connection; intensified perception; increased present-ness; relishing of Inactivity; reduced identification with thoughts and mental constructs; reduced/disappearance of fear of death; reduced cognitive activity; a decreased sense of group identity/need for belonging, and so on (Taylor, 2013; 2017). Items are assessed on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with four reverse questions. The ISSW was originally tested with a “general population” group of 291 individuals and an “awakened” group of 30 individuals, with an alpha reliability of 0.90 (Kilrea & Taylor, 2016; Taylor, 2017).

## **Results**

### ***Qualitative Results***

Table 1 shows the major themes identified by the thematic analysis. Subordinate and related themes are in parenthesis.

[Insert Table 1            ]

### ***Major Themes with Illustrative Quotes***

Here some of the most significant codes are illustrated with quotes from a number of the participants.

- A permanent or ongoing change (but also ever-changing and evolving; process of refining and integrating) (15 participants)

P6: It's both permanent and continually changing - it is an ongoing transformation, and not a one-off. I was fortunate (or unfortunate, depending on your point of view) to wake up with a jolt. There's no going back from that, though the process is alive in me and therefore can't remain static or all based on a fixed point in time.



**P7: In the first couple of years following the event there was a sense of not really quite believing it all despite the amazing occurrences, but now it feels quietly stable...It's like a rewiring has taken place and there is a gentle knowing and deepening with continued quieting of the mind taking place.**

**P10: I can't go back....It's like you can't unring the bell, or you can't unpop a balloon.**

**P13: I just feel lucky to be honest... I feel I'm a different person to who I was then.**

- **Less materialistic orientation (increased altruism) (15)**

**P2: Before the passing, you know, I was probably very concerned with material things, but after she passed away all of a sudden it was like wow, those material things, you know, they didn't matter so much....And since that period of time, and through that searching, and I suppose becoming more aware of any spiritual things, that materialism has just diminished further.**

**P9: I want only what I need and have no desire to any longer accumulate stuff. I want to buy only recycled, used and thrift store items. I sold our 4 bedroom home and almost everything in it. I rented an apartment for a year in California and then got rid of everything else and drove cross country with my two dogs back to New York.**

**P10: I've changed my occupation in that I'm much more in a servant type of role, where I help other people become the best they can be.**

**P16: I've realized I have too much stuff, most of which I don't need. I'm not accumulating anymore stuff and am actively trying to offload the stuff I have.**

- **Different attitude to death (decreased fear of death) (14)**

**P1: There's a peacefulness I do glimpse at from time to time around death. Not sure how to explain this, even though I don't want to die (I have a few things I'd like to do before I die) it doesn't scare me as much because of the loved ones I've lost.**

**P7: Life is wonderful but death feels like it's a natural event with much less impact. It doesn't feel like it's the end, rather a flowing into another unfolding.**

**P10: I worked in a field where I had encountered death a lot...going to autopsies, or going to a crime scene where there's a body. It used to bother me before. I had an unhealthy relationship with the concept of death, but I really don't anymore...I mean I love life and, you know, I don't want to go anytime soon, but I feel like I'm definitely at peace with my physical mortality – and that's a new phenomenon for me.**

**• Inner wellbeing (feeling of connection, trust, love, appreciation, gratitude) (13)**

**P2: I feel like I became more compassionate, more appreciative of myself, the people around me, the world around me. And by the world I mean, you know, going beyond just humanity to animals, nature, and the planet as a whole. And I think I became more connected to that around me immediately. And I feel I became more, very in tune with it, and indeed in spirit, I became much more a spiritual person, probably a much more calm person.**

**P13: I don't take anyone or anything for granted. I live in the moment. I give thanks every morning. I appreciate my life. I just think it's awesome.**

**P14: I trust myself. I trust life, I trust my life. And you know what? That is just, after all what I've been through, it's such a wonderful feeling. Yeah I just, I won't let myself down, and I know that life won't let me down.**

**• Personality and relationship changes (more open, intuitive, self-loving, accepting, authentic, compassionate, more interested in people's stories, having no expectations, more aware of others' feelings, less likely to judge, etc) (13)**

**P4: In my relationships with others, I'm able to be more open, more aware of others' feelings. I'm much less likely to judge others.**

**P8: I am conscious of my interconnectedness with others in a way I wasn't before and aware that I am the recipient of the same energy I direct at others, each and every time. Ultimately that results in greater patience and less emotional reactivity.**

**P13:** It's my changed my identity...it's brought me to who I'm meant to be.... I don't feel competitive at all anymore. I mean, okay, it sneaks in occasionally, but on the whole, I just don't, I don't feel competitive.

- Changes in goals (more internal rather than external, spending time with loved ones, contributing to humanity, altruism, giving back) (12)

**P2:** My goals changed from wanting to have as much money as possible to wishing to be the best person possible, and to have as large of a helpful impact on the world as I can. Before, I would say, I didn't really have any sense of a meaning of life. However, after, I feel the meaning of life is to learn, grow and experience.

**P4:** I find meaning in very small things as well as the big ones. Doing less and doing it better while leaving time for myself has become more central.

**P10:** I was pretty much a ladder climber, I had big ambitions for professional accolades and this kind of stuff and it just doesn't mean much to me anymore.

**P13:** What's important to me is following what I feel my soul guidance is, and trying to...follow that path which seems to be to do with helping people and healing.

- Appreciation of and sense of connection to nature (10)

**P2:** I think there's maybe a stronger connection to nature around you...Just sitting in the woods, and just being, you know, just watching the sunset and just being, listening to the sound of the waves, watching the waves, just being, meditating, getting in the now, being in the moment. I love meditating outside, around nature.

**P11:** You could not get me outside, it wasn't going to happen...everything about nature changed for me, everything about animals. I wasn't a big animal person, not at all. I didn't dislike animals, but I'm just, I'm just not an animal person and all of a sudden, like, when I looked at animals I felt different, I could feel them...So animals and nature definitely opened up for me.

**P14: I love the changing seasons. I'm very aware of that. Where I live, you know, my house is on one side, and just facing a wall, but then there's quite a few trees, and as I'm speaking to you now, you know, I can see the leaves, the green coming on the trees. I noticed that yesterday. I love autumn...So I'm aware of all that as well, very much so.**

- **Enjoyment of doing nothing (enjoyment of solitude) (8)**

**P2: There's definitely a much stronger affiliation to enjoying the now, and being still and doing nothing, and just feeling connected to yourself and whatever's around you.**

**P7: I am very happy doing nothing. Some days I can just sit and listen to the birds or the rain or watch sunlight glinting through leaves for hours and not be bothered that I had wasted my precious time. I used to be very busy with family life and try and achieve lots of mini goals (personal creativity) in my spare time.**

**P11: At night now what I do is come home and sometimes I'm in complete silence. I've got like four on-the-ceiling windows like open. I'm in a perfect spot. I can see nature. I can feel the wind come through and I will sit in silence, like sometimes for an entire weekend. I can sit around by myself which I would have never been able to do that before, ever, ever. And now I need it and want it.**

- **Greater interest in spirituality (8)**

**P12: Because I was left with these feelings but with no concrete beliefs, you know, I kept looking at different religions and different belief systems and nothing fit, nothing fit. So I decided one day that I would believe it all. And as soon as I did that things started to come to me that gave me more of a framework for a belief in let's say like the afterlife and why we are here, and, you know, what our purpose is, and so forth.**

**P13: I feel I'm a spiritual person. I feel connected to my soul. I look for synchronicities and guidance from my soul.**

**P15: I ended up doing a parapsychology course...When you question death, and you start to have an interest in life and death, so you do gravitate towards different things, don't you?...I**

think it definitely put me on a spiritual path, definitely...When you get in touch with death, your own mortality, you know, what is death, what happens when we die, all that kind of stuff, it does put you on a spiritual path.

- **Sudden transformation (8)**

**P3:** I had hold of his hand and I felt a warm sensation run up through my hand and into my body. I felt an immediate feeling of peace and calm. My tears continued to flow but in a gentler manner. I told him I loved him and I “heard” him say, “you’ll be okay”. It felt surreal as I couldn’t initially understand how I could have so quickly accepted the death of my dad and felt so calm, with an inner warmth, or feeling of love.

**P5:** I saw her face, except it wasn’t physical. In fact, I completely lost the sense that there was a physical world around me. We were together, and we were one and the same. Her presence was one of pure love and peace...For the next two or so days, I was in a state of total peace and bliss...I was at peace with the fact that I was going to die, and it truly didn’t matter to me when that would happen. I felt profound love and gratitude toward everyone in my life, everyone who was alive, and for everything I saw and experienced.

**P12:** Then one day I was sitting underneath a tree and I looked at the sky and it was like as if someone had taken the veil that was in front of me off and away from me. I had this intense, overwhelming sense of calm and peace, all the questions that I had that, you know, had agonised me for so long were gone.

- **Gradual Transformation (8)**

**P4:** I’d definitely say now that it wasn’t a matter of a particular point in time but a gradual evolution, which in fact is still continuing. It continues to be much more an evolving story rather than a snapshot. It ebbs and flows.

**P7:** So this awakening has been a long and gentle unfolding of a deeper way of seeing life.

**P14:** It’s been an awakening experience through the loss of both my parents and I suppose it has been a gradual experience, happening up to today really,

## ***Quantitative Results***

The participants' scores on the Spiritual Intelligence Self-Report Inventory ( $M = 3.1$ ,  $SD = 0.5$ ) were significantly higher than the scores of the sample ( $M = 2.2$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ) in King's (2008) original study,  $t(318) = 3.20$ ,  $p < .00015$ .

The participants' scores on the Inventory of Spiritual/Secular Wakefulness ( $M = 113$ ,  $SD = 13$ ) were significantly higher than the scores of the general population group ( $M = 92$ ,  $SD = 16$ ) in Taylor and Kilrea's original study (Taylor & Kilrea, 2016; Taylor, 2017),  $t(305) = 5.15$ ,  $p < .0001$ . The scores were comparable with the 'awake' group in the original study ( $M = 118$ ,  $SD = 12$ ).

## ***Other Significant Results***

In 8 cases the transformation was reported as occurring suddenly, primarily related to one powerful transformational experience, while the 8 other reported a gradual process of change. That is, 8 participants described a specific moment of transformation, while others spoke in terms of an unfolding, an evolution or development.

The length of time since the transformational experience (or since the process of transformation began) ranged from 50 years to 3 years ago ( $M = 13.07$ ). In 8 cases, the length of time was 10 years or more.

## **Discussion**

### ***The Meaning of Suffering***

As well as providing further evidence for post-traumatic growth (or in this variant, post-traumatic transformation), the findings of this study emphasize more generally that the endurance of adversity and suffering can be a productive and meaningful experience. The relationship between suffering and personal development was strongly emphasized by Nietzsche, who saw - partly based on his own experiences of ill health - suffering as "the ultimate emancipator of the spirit...that compels us philosophers to descend into our ultimate depths, and divest ourselves of all trust, all good-nature, veiling, gentleness, and averageness, wherein we have perhaps formerly installed our humanity. I doubt whether such pain 'improves' us ; but I know that it deepens us" (1882/2006, p.x). Later, existentialist and humanistic psychologists such as Frankl (1946/1984) discussed the importance of finding meaning in suffering, in order

to harness its transformational potential. As Frankl stated, “suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning” (p. 117).

More recently, Wong (for example, 2007, 2009) has advocated a new form of positive psychology which embraces challenging aspects of life such as trauma, suffering and death. In particular, Wong’s existential positive psychology has emphasized the importance of facing up to and embracing death, which may have the effect of enabling the individual to live more authentically and to move towards self-actualisation. As Wong & Tomer (2011) suggest, increased awareness of death can alter the individual’s time perspective, leading them to view of their lifetime as limited and precious and bringing about a ‘re-orienting’ of attention towards the present. This could well apply to the participants of this study, in the sense that bereavement may have generated a more acute awareness of their own morality, leading to a different attitude to life. Certainly, the results suggested a new sense of appreciation and present-centeredness, together with a new, more accepting attitude to death.

### *Self-Actualization and “Wakefulness”*

More specifically, both the qualitative and quantitative results of this study point to a powerful, enduring transformation that occurred in the aftermath of bereavement. This transformation led to major changes in the participants’ attitudes to life and death, including new values, perspectives and behavioural states such as a less materialistic and more altruistic and spiritual orientation, enhanced wellbeing, an appreciation and sense of connection to nature, an enjoyment of solitude and inactivity, and so on. These changes were reported (in 15 out of 16 cases) as being stable and permanent over long periods of time (a mean of over 13 years since the original bereavement experiences). These characteristics certainly closely resemble aspects of post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), so that the participants’ experience could justifiably be conceptualized as instances of PTG. However, in 8 cases the participants spoke in terms of a sudden and dramatic transformation, rather than growth. These cases could therefore - in terms of the discussion in the introduction section - be more accurately seen as examples of “post-traumatic transformation.”

The themes identified by this study resemble the characteristics identified by Maslow (1970) of “self-actualizers.” According to Maslow (1970), the characteristics of self-actualizers included a strong tendency to altruism, a greater than normal need for peace and solitude, a great capacity for appreciation, and a constant freshness of perception. Maslow (1970) also found that self-actualizers have a sense of mission, including a desire to make a positive contribution to the world. This was not identified as a main theme of this study, but was strongly

related to the themes of “less materialistic orientation” and “changes in goals” (where “contributing to humanity” was a subordinate theme).

Most participants described a shift away from materialism *towards altruism*. In other words, they felt a strong desire to either help the human beings around them, or to make a contribution to the human race or the world in a wider sense. P10 reported that he had “changed my occupation in that I’m much more in a servant type of role, where I help other people become the best they can be.” While P2 reported that she now felt a desire to “have as large of a helpful impact on the world as I can.” Similarly, P13 spoke in terms of following a new path “which seems to be to do with helping people and healing.”

The themes elicited by the present study are also similar to the characteristics of ideal or optimum states of being that are described across various spiritual traditions. These states of being are conceived as the goals of paths of personal or spiritual development, where human beings attain their fullest potential, and are frequently conceived in terms of “awakening” or “wakefulness.” Some examples are the concept of *bodhi* in Buddhism (usually translated as enlightenment), *sahaja samadhi* in Hindu Yoga, *ming* in Chinese Taoism, *baqa* in Sufism, and *devekut* in the Jewish Kabbalah.

In Taylor (2016) I identified 7 common themes of the processes of spiritual awakening as described (and recommended) by various spiritual traditions. These are: (1) increasing and intensifying awareness; (2) a movement beyond separateness and towards connection and union; (3) the cultivation of inner stillness and emptiness; (4) the development of increased inner stability, self-sufficiency, and equanimity; (5) a movement towards increased empathy, compassion, and altruism; (6) the relinquishing of personal agency; and (7) a movement towards enhanced well-being. Of course, there are also significant differences amongst different traditions’ conceptions of this process, particularly in terms of the emphasis they give to the above themes. For example, altruism and compassion are particularly strongly emphasized in Jewish and Sufi mysticism (Spenser, 1963; Hoffman, 2007) while equanimity and self-sufficiency are strongly emphasized in Buddhism (whereas the theme of connection and union is not strongly emphasised in Buddhism) (Van De Weyer, 2000). In Daoism, the aspect of relinquishing personal agency is strongly emphasized (Spenser, 1963).

There is clearly a significant overlap between the above themes from spiritual traditions and the main themes elicited by the present study. In view of this, it is perhaps possible to say that the participants have undergone a shift equivalent - or at least similar - to “spiritual awakening”, only outside the context of spiritual traditions. This accords with the suggestion that there is a “common core” of characteristics of mystical or spiritual experiences as they are described across traditions, and which can also occur outside the framework of the



traditions, in a “secular” context (Hood, 1975). Cross-traditional studies using Hood’s psychometric “mysticism-scale” (M-scale) have provided significant evidence for this view (for example, Streib and Hood, 2013; Chen, Qi, Hood, and Watson 2011; Chen, Hood, Yang, & Watson, 2011).

To summarize, the participants’ phenomenology could be interpreted both in terms of self-actualization or spiritual wakefulness. However, there is perhaps a caveat in that one cannot be certain that this phenomenology is purely the result of their transformational experiences, or whether the participants were already experiencing such characteristics to some degree beforehand. (This relates to the discussion on previous spirituality in the limitations section below.)

### *The Nature of Transformation through Suffering*

Any attempt to explain the transformation examined by this research is necessarily speculative. There is no obvious reason why an experience of bereavement can, in some individuals, lead to profound and seemingly permanent transformation. However, one possibility is that the phenomenon is related to a dissolution of the normal sense of self or identity (or ego), and the emergence of a new sense of self or identity in its place. This applies not only to bereavement but to any form of “transformation through suffering.” As noted in the introduction, like post-traumatic growth, post-traumatic transformation can occur across a wide range of different types of trauma, including serious illness, disability, addiction, intense stress or depression, and so on. When transformation occurs across these various types of trauma - including bereavement - the same psychological processes are presumably involved.

A dissolution of the ego may occur in two different - but interrelated - ways. First of all, extremely intense stress and anxiety may create so much psychological tension that existing psychological structures can no longer maintain themselves and may suddenly collapse. This is akin to house collapsing instantaneously in an earthquake. This may happen over a long period of stress and anxiety, or through a sudden intense shock, as in the case of bereavement. Everything which constitutes one’s normal, familiar sense of self dissolves away. In many people, this sudden collapse may equate to a psychotic break. But for a few individuals, it may not just be a breakdown but also a “shift up.” A new sense of identity may emerge into the vacuum that has been left, almost like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis.

The second process that may occur is the dissolution of psychological attachments. A psychological attachment is a construct which constitutes or reinforces one’s sense of identity

and provides some degree of security and well-being. Under normal circumstances, most human beings can be seen as psychologically attached to a large number of constructs, such as hopes and ambitions for the future, beliefs about life and the world, accumulated knowledge, accomplishments and achievements, or appearance. At a more tangible level, human beings may be psychologically attached to possessions, social roles (as spouses or parents or in professions), or to other individuals whose approval and attention one might seek. These attachments could be considered the “building blocks” of identity. An individual may feel as if they are “someone” because they have hopes, beliefs, status, a job, and possessions, and so on.

The important point in relation to this study is that during states of trauma, psychological attachments often break down. Often, this is the reason *why* a person experiences a sense of loss and despair: because the attachments they depended upon for identity and a sense of security or well-being have been taken away. For example, if a person is diagnosed with cancer, everything is potentially taken away: their hopes and ambitions, the possessions and achievements they have accumulated, their social roles, and so on. Or if a person suffers from drug or alcohol addiction, their attachments may dissolve away over a long period of time, as they gradually lose everything.

Something similar may occur with bereavement. Even if the death of a loved one does not entail the same kind of wide-ranging loss as when one is personally confronted with death, the effect may be similar. In the sheer shock and devastation of bereavement, everything that a person is attached to may appear meaningless and hollow: their hopes and ambitions, beliefs, possessions, status and so on. (Of course, there is also the dissolution of attachment to the person they have lost, and the loss of role as a spouse or parent that this may bring.)

As a result, with these attachments broken down, a person’s sense of identity may collapse, just as house collapses when a certain number of bricks have been taken away (in distinction to the previous metaphor of a house collapsing suddenly in an earthquake). At this point, a person may feel naked and desolate, as if they have been destroyed. But they may paradoxically be close to transformation. For some, this state of emptiness and desolation may allow a new, more authentic sense of identity to emerge. Kubler-Ross and Kessler (2000) have described how ““Our inherent gifts are often hidden by layers of masks and roles we’ve assumed. The roles . . . can become ‘rocks’ burying our true selves.” (p. 25). However, an encounter with illness or death can “slew off” these masks, and connect a person with their authentic identity. As the old self dissolves away, a new self arises out of its ashes.

Obviously these two process are very closely related, and may even operate in parallel. At the same time, it should be emphasized again that these ideas are speculative. Hopefully

other theories will be put forward. It is also possible that the nature of this transformation will remain unclear.

The fact that, in this study, 13 out of 16 of the deaths were sudden and unexpected is perhaps significant. A sudden and unexpected bereavement is likely to be more shocking and traumatic than one that is anticipated over a long period, where there is some opportunity for adjustment and acceptance. Its effect is likely to be more intense in both of the processes described above: ego-dissolution through intense stress and through the breakdown of psychological attachments.

## Limitations and Further Research

### *Spirituality and Religion*

Since the sample of this study was made up solely of white Caucasians, only 4 of whom reported that they were religious at the time of their transformation, this may limit the interpretation of the findings in relation to other ethnic groups, or to faith groups. Perhaps further studies could focus on bereavement experience in other groups, or provide wide-ranging studies of samples in which different groups were equally represented. 13 of the 16 participants were highly educated, with college degrees or higher qualifications. Due to the small sample size, it is impossible to say that this high level of education was a factor predisposing them to their transformational experiences, but perhaps further research could clarify this.

Although most participants reported that their transformation occurred without any prior warning, it is perhaps significant that 8 participants reported a “spiritual” aspect to their lives beforehand (with 3 others describing an interest in philosophical or metaphysical issues). Perhaps this helped to facilitate - or to prepare the ground for - their transformational experiences. P10 explicitly reported this, saying that “I felt it was my interest in spirituality, a more simplified view of spirituality, that helped me begin to, you know, sort things out...and then when the intense grief came from my parents’ loss, that’s when, you know, when the awakening actually began.”

Research has suggested that post-traumatic growth and post-traumatic transformation are most likely to occur in individuals who are open to change and novelty, and who are prepared to acknowledge difficulties, with an attitude of acceptance (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Taylor, 2012). Spirituality is frequently associated with qualities of acceptance and openness (Taylor, 2017), so perhaps the participants had cultivated the qualities through their previous development, thus predisposing them to transformation.

The previous interest in spirituality of 8 participants - which possibly led to some degree of spiritual development - could also partially account for the high mean score of the participants' on the two scales. Perhaps some participants would have scored highly even before their transformational experiences. However, it should be noted that a "greater interest in spirituality" emerged as a theme in the study. Participants who had not been interested in or aware of spiritual ideas or practices beforehand now began to explore them, and some participants who had had some interest in spirituality beforehand (or in philosophical and metaphysical questions) began to explore it in more depth. This fits with previous research showing that post-traumatic growth is associated with increased spirituality (Walker et. al., 2009). There is an interesting circularity here, in that spirituality may facilitate post-traumatic growth (or post-traumatic transformation) which in turn increases interest and engagement in spirituality.

A future research study could perhaps explore bereavement-related transformation specifically in individuals who had no previous interest in spirituality.

### *Natural Transformation?*

One might also argue that it is not possible to say *for certain* that the transformations described by the participants were caused by their bereavements. Perhaps the transformations would have occurred naturally and spontaneously, even if they had not undergone bereavement, through a response to general life experiences, or through a natural process of maturation. Tornstam's (2012) theory of "gerotranscendence" suggests a relationship between increasing age and spiritual development, implying that growing older may - at least for some people - be associated with a natural process of spiritual development. Such a relationship is also implied by Erikson's (1950) theory that old age may involve a movement towards increasing generativity and ego-integrity. However, these concepts suggest a gradual process, whereas in half of the cases in this study, transformation occurred suddenly and dramatically. The age of the participants does not support this interpretation either, since their mean age at the time of transformation was 39. In addition, my previous research (Taylor. 2012: 2013a; 2013b) suggests that sudden and dramatic transformational experiences do not usually occur spontaneously, but are usually linked to specific events - in most cases, traumatic events.

### *The Possibility of Self-Deception*

Another issue that needs to be addressed is the possibility that the participants of this study were experiencing self-delusion, constructing a positive fantasy of self-improvement as an alternative to the painful reality of bereavement. Similar skeptical arguments have been made in relation to post-traumatic growth as a concept, questioning whether the phenomenon actually exists (Hobfoll et al.; 2007; Sumalla et al., 2009). Taylor and Brown (1988) suggested that self-deceptive strategies can be used to deal with "negative information", including loss and death, together with an unreal sense of limited control of an unpredictable world, and a bleak future. Cognitive dissonance and positive illusion have been suggested as strategies individuals use to deal with traumatic experiences, causing them to believe that they have undergone positive development (Taylor, 1983). So is it possible that these self-deceptive strategies were used by some of the participants as a way of managing the traumatic experience of bereavement?

However, it is important to note that the participants described their experience in terms of a *progression* rather than a regression, involving a shift to a higher-functioning mode in many areas. For example, most of the participants reported a more altruistic and compassionate orientation, a more trusting and accepting attitude to life, enhanced wellbeing, decreased fear of death, more authentic relationships, a greater sense of connection to nature, and so on. Arguably, regression of self-delusion would generate some degree of impairment or loss of functioning rather than such wide-ranging positive effects. In a related way, such traits indicate an increased engagement with reality, and an increased openness to experience, whereas regression or self-delusion indicate the opposite: an evasion of reality, and a closing down to experience.

Another important point is that the transformation reported by the participants was associated with major, apparently deep-rooted changes of attitude, behaviour and lifestyle which, in many cases, had been sustained over long periods of time. As noted above, the mean length of time since transformation was reported as over 13 years, with 8 participants reporting 10 years or more. Three participants' bereavement experiences occurred while they were teenagers (aged 14 to 16), and all three reported that the experience had helped to determine the career and lifestyle paths they had chosen for their adult lives. For example, one participant (P14) described how "the personal transformation I underwent was what enabled me to embrace ministry...I absolutely could not have done so otherwise." Another participant (P12) described how her bereavement experience at the age of 14 encouraged her to adopt nursing as her profession. As she stated, "I had had a very very strong spiritual pull one way or another and that was why I went into nursing."

Other participants who had already adopted careers (since they were older when their transformational experiences occurred) reported how their transformational experiences led them to shift roles. For example, one participant (P14) explained how a desire to do “more meaningful” work led her to switch roles from a careers adviser to a counsellor. (In all, seven participants reported that career changes had followed from their transformational experiences.) Another participant (P11) described how, although she still had the same job (as director of practice relations for a dermatology group) her attitude to the role had changed, in that she had become much more conscious of the way that patients and her employees were treated. As she reported, “I want to make sure that every patient that walks through the door, every employee that works there, they’re always respected, valued, cared about like that – it’s ridiculously important to me.”

Here the important point is that, if the participants were merely presenting a narrative of transformation based on self-deception, it is questionable whether the changes generated by the transformation would be so stable and long-lasting. Arguably, the effects of self-deceptive cognitive strategies would be more superficial and less stable.

Another factor that argues against the possibility of self-deception is that the changes reported by the participants were confirmed by their responses to the psychometric scales. Of course, it is possible that these responses were also the result of self-deception - a continuation of the attempt to present a narrative of self-transformation - but the degree of effort and ingenuity which would be required to complete the surveys in such a way as to *simulate* the expected responses surely reduces this possibility somewhat.

Nonetheless, the unreliability of self-reporting could be seen as a weakness of this study, and in future research measures could possibly be taken to provide a more objective approach. For example, relatives or longstanding friends of participants could also be interviewed, to ascertain their view of whether the participants have changed significantly.

## *Age*

Previous research has suggested that post-traumatic growth occurs across every age group (apart from early childhood) and that it occurs just as (if not more) frequently in adolescents as in adults (Glad et al.; 2013; Vloet et al, 2017). Although the sample of this study is too small to offer any real evidence in this regard, it is worth noting that the age at which the participants experienced transformation was very wide-ranging, from 14 to 56, with a mean of 39. Three participants’ bereavement experiences occurred while they were teenagers (aged 14 to

16). This would suggest that, like post-traumatic growth, post-traumatic transformation is not strongly associated with any particular age.

## **Conclusion**

Obviously there are still many other issues that need to be considered here, besides the psychological processes associated with this transformation. How frequently does transformation through bereavement occur amongst the general population? If some people are more likely to experience transformation through bereavement than others, what personality traits or attitudes is it associated with? Is it related to gender and education? (The participants of this study were primarily female and highly educated, but the sample is obviously too small to make any generalizations.)

However, it is clear that, for the participants of this study, bereavement was the trigger of a profound personal transformation that appears to have maintained itself over a long period of time, with a new outlook on life, new values, new ambitions, new types of relationships, and so on. In terms of Maslow's concepts, bereavement appears to have prompted a shift into the mode of "self-actualizing," which has subsequently become the participants' ongoing life-orientation. Or in terms of the concepts of spiritual traditions, bereavement has apparently prompted the participants to attain - at least to some degree - the optimum, higher-functioning state described as "wakefulness."

## **Appendix - Semi-structured Interview Questions**

**Q: Was there a particular point at which you underwent transformation/ had an awakening experience?**

**Q: What was the context in which the experience occurred?**

**Q: How has your attitude to life changed since the experience? (For example, your goals or sense of meaning in life.)**

**Q: Has your attitude to material things changed?**

**Q: Do you feel there is any difference in your relationships with other people?**

**Q: Are you happy to do nothing?**

**Q: Do you have a strong sense of empathy and compassion?**

**Q: Do you feel a sense of connection?**

**Q: Has your attitude to death changed?**

**Q: Do you think the transformation is permanent?**

**Q: Did you have a prior interest in spirituality?**

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